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# Adult Education in Correctional Settings: A Critical Literature Review

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Keywords: Correctional education; adult basic education; human capital theory; recidivism

**Abstract:** This paper reviews literature relating to correctional education in five adult education journals and examines trends in adult education revealed through the analysis. Through exploration of these trends, adult educators can begin to address the motivation for offering these types of education and who it is intended to benefit.

## Introduction

Adults with lower levels of formal education are more likely to be incarcerated than adults with higher levels of education (de Maeyer, 2001). Consequently, many correctional educational efforts are based on raising inmates' levels of education in the hope of reducing recidivism (Wade, 2007 and Esperian, 2010). Wade (2007) describes a three-fold purpose of correctional education as acquiring practical knowledge to increase employment opportunities for inmates upon release, encouraging responsible thinking, and using the knowledge and new ways of thinking to avoid future incarceration. In contrast, de Maeyer (2001) writes of the purpose of education in correctional institutions as liberation into new ways of thinking and acting for prisoners. Other programs emphasize either cognitive or emotional transformation (Kilgore, 2001). These approaches to educating inmates echo contrasting views on the purposes of education within the field of adult education (Heaney, 1996).

This review provides perspective on how writing about incarceration within the context of adult education journals has been represented and discussed over time and focuses on trends and theoretical perspectives espoused within the literature. This review demonstrates how correctional education within the context of adult education, as reflected in these journals, has changed throughout time. Examining which areas have dominated and which have been neglected provides insight into the field of adult education. When reviewing the literature, the following questions were considered: What are the theoretical and ideological frameworks of the articles? What topics are addressed (or not addressed) within the articles? What aspects of adult education do the authors rely on in their analyses?

## Methods

This paper presents the findings of a content analysis of five key adult education publications: *Adult Education Quarterly* (1950 – present), *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (1982 – present), *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (1979 – present), *Studies in the Education of Adults* (1990 – present), and *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education* (formerly titled *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* and *Adult Basic Education*) (1977 – present). These journals were chosen to provide perspective on various facets of adult education from literacy to adult basic education to informal learning and other topics. The following search terms were used: *prison, prisoner, incarceration, incarcerate, correctional, corrections, penitentiary, inmate,*

*offender, jail, recidivism, and detention* to identify articles for the analysis. Relevant articles were reviewed for topical themes and evidence of underlying assumptions.

From the five journals, 30 relevant articles were identified. The articles were read for content, and then analyzed for stated and assumed topics and underlying themes. Eight topical themes were identified from the relevant articles: *literacy and adult basic education, vocational education, recidivism reduction, history, probationary/parole education, education for prison educators, general education (specific type of education not specified), and emotions and learning*. Additionally, each article was examined for any underlying assumptions. Limitations of this study included only examining major adult education journals, thus potentially excluding relevant articles from other journals, and selecting journals with various years of publication, so research and social trends are not equally able to be reflected throughout all journals.

### **Findings**

The majority of articles on this topic were theoretical or reflective pieces, not empirical research. Of the research-based articles, there were some quantitative studies and fewer qualitative studies. For most of the topical themes within the articles, the topics did not demonstrate greater popularity within a specific period of time, with a few exceptions. These exceptions include literacy and ABE which became more popular topic within the past 20 years and instructor education was only emphasized in the mid-1980s through early 1990s. Vocational education studies have persisted in popularity throughout the time covered in this analysis, which reflects the recurring theme of training individuals to contribute to a better society and measuring success based on quantifiable outcomes (e.g., employment and lack of recidivism).

#### **Literacy and Adult Basic Education**

Literacy and adult basic education (ABE) have been strongly associated with adult education efforts for many years (Newman, Lewis, & Beverstock, 1993). However, in my review of adult education publications, relatively little work has been published on this topic within the scope of adult education. Results of this analysis demonstrate that literacy has broad meanings when applied to correctional settings, ranging from English as a Second Language (ESL) education to learning to read and write to reading and discussing literature. The variety of the literature reflects the diversity of the topic and the purposes for which it is used. Several articles address literacy and ABE as a means to reduce recidivism (James et al., 1996; Lockard, 1999; Wade, 2007; and Webster et al., 1999). The common thread of thought is that a lack of education results in a deficit of marketable skills, and the ex-inmates are more likely to commit additional crimes and be re-incarcerated if they do not have additional skills when they leave prison or jail. These programs focus largely on teaching inmates basic reading and writing on obtaining certification, such as a GED, or on improving ESL skills while incarcerated (see Gardner, 2011).

#### **Vocational Education**

Vocational education has been a staple of prison education for many years as a means to provide inmates with skills to use after they are released from jail or prison. Within the five adult education journals in this study, articles have been published on vocational training throughout the history of the journals with the first vocational article published in 1969 and the most recent in 2011. The articles are interspersed throughout the timeline of publications with a concentration of articles published or co-published by one author in the mid-1990s (Uche & Harries-Jenkins, 1994a; Uche & Harries-Jenkins, 1994b; and Uche, 1995), indicating a

consistent interest in the topic throughout adult education publication history. Notably, many of these studies (four out of six) are quantitative and are performed, in part, to influence policy decisions, which accounts for some of the focus on reducing recidivism and lessening the prison population.

### **Recidivism Reduction**

As seen in the previous two sections, reduction of recidivism is a primary goal of many correctional education programs. Many of the articles in this analysis address recidivism through particular programs, such as literacy or vocational education. In other articles (also categorized elsewhere in this paper), authors commonly address and propose measures to reduce recidivism (Biswalo, 2011; James et al., 1996; Gardner, 2011; Lockard, 1999; Uche & Harries-Jenkins, 1994a; Uche & Harries-Jenkins, 1994b; Wade, 2007; Webster et al., 1999). Additionally, many other articles in this analysis mention lessening the rate of recidivism as a hopeful result of the education provided in their context. As Johnson et al. (1974) describe, “[a]cademic education is recognized in many correctional institutions as a cornerstone of criminal rehabilitation” (p. 121), and consequently, many of the authors of articles found for this analysis embrace methods of measuring recidivism reduction as a quantifiable way to track the success of their programs. The reliance on quantitative methods in many of these studies supports the notion that many of the programs described must continue to prove themselves to have access to jails and prisons and to receive funding for the program, if necessary.

### **History**

Although several articles included historical elements, only one article concentrated on the history of adult education within prisons. Hannam (1982) ventures beyond the scope of adult education journals and examines the history of prison reform. Of relevance to many other articles in this analysis, he particularly notes the increased emphasis on education and training to reduce recidivism that occurred in the 1920s, described as a movement toward “fitness for citizenship” for former inmates (p. 366). The rise of this direction for education helps explain the strong focus on reducing recidivism found throughout many of the 27 articles included in this paper. It also provides grounds for the number of quantitative studies that are present within adult education literature on incarceration as necessary to satisfy the demands of the field as correctional institutions increasingly turned to education to reform their inmates.

### **Probationary/Parole Education**

Although the majority of studies concentrated on education within prisons and jails, three articles discussed education programs designed for people on probation or parole (Burstow, 1989; Knox, 2004; and Webster et al., 1999). The small number of studies on this topic and the wide range of dates of publication indicate that the topic has not been widely researched in adult education.

### **Education for Prison Educators**

Many publications in this analysis reflect education for inmates; however, three publications concentrate on educating the educators (Goldin & Thomas, 1984; Marsick, 1990; and Fox, 1991). Each of these three articles identifies problems that educators face and provides some ideas for action and for building relationship within the correctional facilities that promote a better teaching environment.

### **Emotions and Learning**

Three articles on emotions and learning comprise a small but noteworthy segment of correctional education (Higgins, 2004; Kilgore, 2001; and Rocks, 1985). These two studies illuminate a part of adult education that is not widely discussed in other publications, namely the

intersection of emotions and education. The paucity of studies on this topic and the very different ways and time periods in which these three articles were written demonstrate a general lack of interest in the topic. Although the methods used in the three studies were quite different, all demonstrate the importance of attaching positive emotions to education in prison.

### **General Correctional Education**

In this analysis, three articles dealt with general education and incarceration without specifying a particular type of educational program or focus (Collins, 1988; Kuhne, et al., 1997; and MacNeil, 1980). These studies are diverse in their approaches and findings, but each relate to some aspect of correctional education and are scattered throughout the timeline of the examined literature. Each of the disparate subjects addressed in the articles (*literacy and adult basic education, vocational education, recidivism reduction, history, probationary/parole education, education for prison educators, general education, and emotions and learning*), although they do not have much in common with each other, adds to our knowledge of issues studied in relation to incarceration and education.

### **Number of Articles Published**

The following table shows the number of relevant articles per journal and the average number of correctional education articles published per decade by each journal. Although *IJLE* published the highest number of articles per decade, the number of correctional education articles published is small in all adult education journals examined.

<b>Journal</b>	<b>Number of Relevant Articles</b>	<b>Average Number Published Per Decade</b>
International Journal of Lifelong Education	11	3.7
Adult Education Quarterly	8	1.3
New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education	5	1.5
Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education	3	0.8
Studies in the Education of Adults	3	1.3

### **Discussion**

The findings of this historical analysis of education and incarceration within major adult education journals have provided insight into themes, trends, and common assumptions within adult education scholarship relating to correctional education. A large quantity of research relied on human capital theory as a basis for justifying correctional education efforts. Additionally, authors grounded their work in ideologies of social justice, humanitarianism, and social reform.

The prevalence of articles embracing human capital ideology, which emphasizes skill and knowledge development for the purpose of economic gain, demonstrates the pervasive nature of this philosophy within adult education. Echoes of the prominence of human capital theory's intrusion into adult education are found in many of these studies, which have a focus on the success of specific, measurable goals. Human capital theory claims that "more educated workers will always be more productive than their less educated counterparts" (Baptiste, 2001, p. 189).

The emphasis on using education to change criminal behavior, reduce recidivism, and support an individual's integration into mainstream society reflects the values espoused by human capital theorists. As Druine and Wildemeersch (2000) observe, no standardized methods exist to mold people, including inmates, into model citizens, but many articles seem to seek a path to realize this goal.

Another consistent trend present in the articles was a persistent lack of data from the inmates' point of view. Additionally, few qualitative studies have been published, and only a small number of these articles reflect data about their experiences from inmates' perspectives. This is surprising considering the acceptance of qualitative research throughout adult education; it may be due to the difficulty of gaining access to inmates, which creates a challenge for qualitative researchers who desire to hear the stories of incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, few articles investigate potential issues related to race or sexuality, and most articles focused on correctional issues within the United States.

Examination of this topic provides insight into potential areas for future investigation that are not well-researched and could benefit from future study. Issues currently lacking or not well-represented include a deficiency of international focus beyond Euro-centric countries, a shortage of articles specifically addressing the intersection of incarceration with issues such as race, ethnicity, poverty, social class, and sexual orientation. Gender was somewhat represented and several articles used feminist theory as a framework. Furthermore, as previously noted, the paucity of qualitative data from inmates' viewpoints indicates a need to engage their voices to more fully comprehend how educational programs affect those who participate. By acknowledging the underlying purposes for the classes, adult educators can begin to address the motivation for offering these classes and whether the education is intended to benefit the participants, society in general, the instructors, the correctional facility, or a combination of these groups.

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